

Deerfield, IL - Congressman Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park) and freelance writer Dr. Richard Benkin teamed up to win the release of pro-Israel journalist Shoaib Choudhury from a Bangladeshi prison on Saturday. Choudhury, a Bangladesh citizen, was charged with sedition, accused of committing espionage for the State of Israel. He spent more than 17 months in a Bangladesh prison simply for advocating Jewish and Muslim dialogue and establishing ties between Bangladesh and Israel. Kirk praised Dr. Benkin of Mt. Prospect, highlighting his advocacy on behalf of Shoaib Choudhury and his role in Shoaib's freedom.

"Dr. Benkin's work teaches us that one person can make a difference," said Kirk. "Shoaib Choudhury sat in a Bangladesh prison for over 17 months for committing no crime. But for Dr. Benkin, Shoaib would still be in prison possibly facing a death sentence. Benkin's commitment to justice is the reason Shoaib is free today."

Shoaib Choudhury intended to travel to Israel to participate in the annual Hebrew Writers Conference in 2003. He would have been the first Bangladesh citizen ever to participate in this annual global conference on Israel's international status. Just before boarding the plane, he was arrested. Choudhury originally thought he had been arrested for violating Bangladesh's prohibition on travel to Israel -- a minor offense carrying a maximum penalty of 90 days in jail.

Choudhury was taken to Dhaka Central Jail where after months of interrogation, he was charged with sedition, a crime punishable by death.

Writing several stories for various international newspapers advocating for Shoaib's release, Dr. Benkin called Congressman Kirk, hoping to receive the federal government's help.

In April, Dr. Benkin met with Congressman Kirk who arranged a meeting with Bangladesh Ambassador to the United States, Shamsher M. Chowdhury. Together, they discussed ways on expediting Shoaib's release from prison and also his declining health.

While in prison, Choudhury suffered from glaucoma. Working with U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, Harry Thomas, Kirk worked with the State Department to secure Shoaib's release and for him to receive proper medical treatment. Three weeks later, Dr. Benkin received a

surprise phone call while on his way to synagogue.

“Hello my brother, I am free,” were the words Dr. Benkin heard from Choudhury.

“I didn’t mind crying in public because they were tears of immense joy,” said Benkin. “When I called him on Sunday, I asked him how it felt to sleep at home for the first time in seventeen months. He said it was like a dream, something I wondered would ever happen again.”

A couple days before his release, Choudhury met with government officials who expressed optimism over allowing open news and information about the Middle East, to promote and support interfaith dialogue, and to help in the restoration of Bangladeshi values of tolerance and democracy in opposition to radical fundamentalists. Shoaib’s computers and other possessions are to be returned to him within two weeks.

Although released on bail, the charge of sedition has currently not been dropped. Since Choudhury’s arrest, Bangladesh legalized travel to Israel. Congressman Kirk is working with the State Department to ensure the charges against Choudhury are dropped.

Note !!! Congressman Kirk and Dr. Benkin will be honored for their work during a special ceremony at Temple Chai, 1670 Checker Road, Long Grove, Illinois on Sunday, May 22.

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